

# 'Not a Breach, but an Expansion': Diasporic Communities in the Twenty-first Century

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*But we by a love so much refined,  
That ourselves know not what it is,  
Inter-assured of the mind,  
Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss.*

*Our two souls therefore, which are one,  
Though I must go, endure not yet  
A breach, but an expansion,  
Like gold to airy thinness beat.*

— John Donne, *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*

Every December, as we make our annual trip to our home country, the scene in the airplane is roughly the same. The pilot's announcement of the preparations for landing is interspersed with some squeals of delight. In the twinkling lights of the hometown, the eyes of the travellers search for familiar landmarks; the serpentine roads laden with a stream of traffic are strangely welcoming. The parents point out to city that their children have never lived in and tell them that it is 'home'. The younger ones oblige, accepting the parent's word, but there is often a hint of scepticism in the little faces here and there.

Last year, during our annual sojourn to India, which is our home country, I was seated next to my daughter. After years of witnessing my excitement and delight during our annual visit, my daughter turned to me and said 'home?' She expected me to be smiling with delight as I had done for years, to show her that this is where we belong and are always happy to return. But as I peered through the window, I felt a pang for something I missed. My other home that I had left behind. 'Yes', I told her. 'And we would be going back in a few days'.

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For a moment, suspended in air, I was left to wonder, where is ‘home?’ Where do we return? Is it the homeland that we left years ago and now return every holidays, to acquaint our children and reassure ourselves that this is where we belong? Or is it the new place, no longer new for many of us, the new location that we have embraced as our own? What is it that defines our identity—the past or the present, or the prospect of an eventual return in distant future? Or is it the journey itself where the diasporic subject’s excitement to go home is tempered by an equally strong desire to return?

This special issue was borne out of our own conflicting desires as diasporic subjects straddling two worlds, not precariously, but finding ourselves being gradually rooted into the adopted land. While there is always an element of nostalgia and a yearning to return home, it frequently alternates with a sense of purpose and commitment one has developed for the country to which one has migrated, which manifests itself in a desire to return after a visit to the home country. To an extent, a diasporic subject is always between and betwixt—forever making real and metaphoric journeys between the past and present. Being neither here nor there does not imply being ‘nowhere’ but being ‘everywhere’—at home in both places, and also in the space between them—if one borrows the word from John Donne (2015[1611]) in the aforementioned poem which suggests ‘... like gold to airy thinness beat’. In such a reading, the evolving diaspora inhabits an in-between space which is both firm, contextual and social, on the one hand, and transient and political, on the other. From this space, the diaspora, much in the way as Donne’s compass, in *A Valediction Forbidding Mourning*, spreads out one arm to travel to the outside world and eventually returns to the other in its safe haven.

In his ethnographic study on rituals and symbols of Central African tribes, Victor Turner extended Arnold Van Gennep’s (1960) insights about the liminal stage that is central to the rites of passage in ancient societies. The first phase of the rites of passage is characterized by the separation of the subject from a particular social identity. The second or the liminal space is a period when an individual is betwixt-and-between the acceptable social norms—or the structured role within a community. The final phase is the post liminal phase of reintegration into society, albeit as a qualitatively different person than the one who started the journey.

The journey of diasporic subject begins on the similar pattern with the decision to relocate—to leave behind the familiar world of home. But it is the next phase, the extended middle where the journey lingers—the zone of liminality where the possibilities of return are frequently toyed with, the return journeys are performed in mind, or during the annual visits every year—but the ultimate return is endlessly deferred. Like Turner’s conceptualization of the liminal zone as a place of ambiguity, openness and indeterminacy, diasporic journeys constantly hover between the two worlds. Standing equidistant from two cultures, the social norms, regulations and belief systems become less rigid. It allows for new understandings of the self. Being away from one’s own family and society does not always signify being alone. It is a zone marked by transient yet firm communities. According to Turner, the inmates of the liminal zone exist in *communitas*: ‘Social agents when stripped of the sense of differentiation and separation, as a result of social structures, recognize their common bonds’ (Turner, 1969, p. 97). *Communitas* as

a social form alternates with the everyday social structures much like the new communities formed by the diasporic subjects of these essays. Do these transient communities enrich the life of the diasporic subject or do they come at the cost of firm bonds of family and friendships that one leaves behind when one relocates?

There are, of course, no easy answers.

Over the last couple of hundred years, the meaning of diaspora has vastly evolved, and not least due to the emergence of technology that allows community and identity formations in ways that were not possible in the past. The rise of the professional, the highly qualified and well-paid migrant is as much of a reality as is the continuing migration of less-skilled workers, the 'trailing wife' of the expatriate is as much a reality as that of a highly paid female professionals as well as foreign spouses of local citizens. There are also many within a diaspora who have taken up citizenships of other countries but still stay connected to their land of origin in innumerable ways.

With these developments, as well as the passing of time and technology, the agency of the migrant, thus, begins to play a stronger role in the decision to migrate, as well as to return or not. Diasporic imagination also changes with every new generation, and identities become further fragmented, or complex with an increase in the numbers of international marriages, families with more than one citizenship and multiple forms of belonging (here one needs to consider the official nomenclature like permanent residence, overseas citizens and others) implies loyalty to both countries and so on.

So, what does this liminal diasporic space look like as we stand less than ten years from completing the first quarter of a new century? We argue that though the diaspora still inhabits a space between and betwixt, the axis is gradually moving towards building a stronger tie to the adopted land. At the same time the technology has made the native land more and more unattainable, thus reducing its symbolic value of the past to some extent.

The contributors to this special issue have tried to explore the dynamic notion of the diaspora within the context of Asia from multidisciplinary perspectives, with a focus on some marginal voices within it, like migrant workers, women, refugees and so on. Most of these articles reveal the existence of a tension inherent in the evolving role of the term 'diaspora' itself, which the authors try to unpack to show how transnationalism develops in unique ways.

The essay, 'Race, Identity and Nationality: Relocating Nepali Nationalism in India' by Tanka B. Subba turns to the Nepali diaspora in India. Though the two countries share close ties and the migration across the border is common, Nepali diaspora rues the common perception of their fellow countrymen as illegal immigrants. Despite living in India for several generations, most are not accepted as Indian citizens and hence, do not have equal rights as other Indians. Lengthy documentation, en masse eviction are frequent complains despite the fact the community has sacrificed its members to protect India's borders and fight its enemies, right from India's pre-independence era. The article explores the tension that is inherent to Indian Nepali nationalism because their stories are not complete without reference to another country called Nepal, which though culturally and geographically close, is still a different country to most of the Indians.

The exploration of the Nepali diaspora and the close history that the two nations share is followed by turn to history. The political partition of India in 1947 into a truncated India and the dominion of Pakistan witnessed a wave of forced migration. Gross and barbarous acts of violence perpetuated against women during this violent era were on the hand a product of hyper-masculinized nationalist ideology: one that perceived women's bodies as sites where national and religious identities needed to be forcibly inscribed.

Dibyaduti Roy's essay, 'From Non-places to Places: Transforming Partition Rehabilitation Camps through the Gendered Quotidian', explores a key facet of India-Pakistan partition: transitory rehabilitation camps established primarily for the recovery of female refugees. Through an analysis of non-fictional testimonies and selected Partition fiction, the essay demonstrates how the transformation of these refugee rehabilitation camps—from transitory *non-places* into referential spatial locations or *places*—was facilitated through the quotidian performances of the female Partition refugees.

Moving on to other parts of Asia, the following essay on Sikh Women Diaspora of Malaysia examines how the diasporic women of the Sikh community in Malaysia have exercised their rights within the religious domain. Sikhism has a unique view of gender ideology; from a gender perspective, God is symbolically described as a husband to all of humanity, whereby all humans, irrespective of gender, are perceived as having the status of wives to God. In this light, the authors explore the patriarchal cultural practices that dominate the world view of the women and the specific recommendations to uplift and strengthen gender equality among the diasporic Sikh community.

Turning to another significant minority community in Malaysia, the following article 'Old Market Square as a Container of Diasporic Meaning in Chinese' reflects on the threat to history, community and cultural practices posed by relentless urban growth on the diasporic Chinese community in Malaysia. The essay closely examines the spatial dynamics of the Petaling Street and Market Square (Medan Pasar) which form the foci of Chinese diasporic community in heart of the cosmopolitan city like Kuala Lumpur.

Extending beyond the spatial and geographical borders, 'Gendered Migrations and Literary Narratives' turns to the virtual communities of South Asian diasporic women. Most of these women now living in different parts of the world started as 'trailing wives', who, given the cultural expectations, arrived overseas for the betterment of husband's career and children's life prospects. Belonging to the group of high- or middle-level skill category, these women found themselves at the mercy of the immigration rules and job market of the host country. As they faced the prospect of deskilling, many of them turned to alternate professions like writing which also offered a space for self-expression. Writing in online diasporic communities not only provided a sense of purpose and achievement to the women but also a place of belonging that replaced the close ties they had left behind in the home country.

The collection reflects the dilemmas and tensions of the South and South East Asian diasporic communities existing within Asia—a segment which has been largely ignored as most of the studies in the field have concentrated on the

diasporic communities in the West. The etymology of the word 'diaspora' comes from the Jewish 'dispersal', most often due to persecution, or the fear of the same. In its essence, a diaspora is characterized by a sense of yearning for the homeland, and a curious attachment to its traditions, religions and languages. V. S. Naipaul (2010) once wrote that his grandfather, a labourer from the erstwhile United Provinces, 'carried his village with him' to Trinidad. Naipaul's grandfather's journey to Trinidad 'had been final', but 'a few reassuring relationships, a strip of land, and he could satisfyingly recreate an eastern Uttar Pradesh village in central Trinidad'. Salman Rushdie (1997), in his novel *Shame*, adds that the longing for the homeland is countered by the desire to belong to a new home, so the migrant remains a creature of the edge, 'the peripheral man'. These are feelings and tensions all too familiar to today's diasporic communities, but the other side of the coin is also equally true, that the diaspora in many imaginative ways is making a move to shift from the periphery and closer to the centre.

So after a long holiday in India, when our flight finally lands at Kuala Lumpur International airport, I look at the lush palm trees just across the runway, the tropical rainforests a few miles away, and I turn to my son to say, 'We are home!'.

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